New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1953

Volume XIV, Number 18 • Rachel W. Coffin, *Editor* • Week of October 12, 1953

1953 PRODUCTIONS
Premieres in Other Years

Original Reviews Appeared In These Volumes

1952 Vol.

Stage Play	*Page*
Bernardine	231
Children's Hour (The)	151
Deep Blue Sea (The)	207
*Dial M for Murder	215
Evening with Beatrice Lillie (An)	254
Male Animal (The)	297
Mrs. McThing	359
My Darlin' Aida	218
New Faces of 1952	278
Pal Joey	398
*Seven Year Itch (The)	186
Time of the Cuckoo (The)	235
Time Out for Ginger	177
Two's Company	157
Whistler's Grandmother	160
*Wish You Were Here	266

1951 Vol.

Fourposter (The)	190
*King and I (The)	304
Moon Is Blue (The)	322

1950 Vol.

*Guys and Dolls	185

1949 Vol.

*South Pacific	312

**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of October 12, 1953*

1953 PRODUCTIONS
Premieres During 1953

Reviews Appear in This Volume

Stage Play	*Page*
Anna Russell and Her Little Show	289
Bat (The)	390
Be Your Age	397
Bleak House	315
Camino Real	330
*Can-Can	304
Carnival in Flanders	286
Crucible (The)	383
Date With April (A)	318
Emperor's Clothes (The)	368
*Fifth Season (The)	380
Hazel Flagg	362
Horses in Midstream	325
John Brown's Body	358
*Little Hut (The)	262
Love of Four Colonels (The)	394
Love's Labour's Lost	372
Maggie	351
*Me and Juliet	298
Men of Distinction	307
Merchant of Venice (The)	340
Mid-Summer	386
Misalliance	354
*My 3 Angels	334
Oklahoma!	294
On Borrowed Time	365
*Picnic	348
Pin to See the Peepshow (A)	278
Pink Elephant (The)	312
*Porgy and Bess	337
Red Rainbow (A)	281
Room Service	322
Strong Are Lonely (The)	269
*Take a Giant Step	274
*Tea and Sympathy	266
Touchstone	375
*Wonderful Town	344

CRITICS' CIRCLE AWARD 320

Theatre Openings

"The Little Hut"

**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of October 12, 1953*

Theatre Critics' Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York newspapers.

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

All Reviews copyrighted by the newspapers and reproduced by permission.

Yearly Subscription $25.00

Published by CRITICS' THEATRE REVIEWS, Inc., 235 East 22nd Street, New York 10, N. Y.

"The Little Hut"

DAILY NEWS

October 8, 1953

'Little Hut' a Light French Farce With Some Crisp English Humor

By JOHN CHAPMAN

"The Little Hut" is a saucy French idea strengthened immeasurably by some tart, crisp British humor. Last evening at the beautifully remodeled Coronet Theatre it was given a most engaging performance by three players from abroad, Anne Vernon, Roland Culver and Colin Gordon. The first audiences, being rather ignorant in most matters, are unsure of themselves.

The producers, John C. Wilson and the London firm of H. M. Tennent, Ltd., rightly and without apology call this play a light comedy. What, indeed, could be lighter than casting on a desert island for three acts a husband, a wife and a lover? That is the French part of it, for "The Little Hut" was written by Andre Roussin. The British and really humorous elements of the play lie in Nancy Mitford's adaptation—and in the acting under the inventive but sometimes strenuous direction by Peter Brook.

Convenient, Anyhow.

I shan't hint at much of the plot, because there isn't much more than a hint in it. Mr. Culver is a pleasant but unimaginative business man who has taken his beautiful French wife on a cruise. His best friend, Mr. Gordon, has come along, and after a shipwreck the travelers set up a menage-a-trois on a lush but daffy tropic isle. Since the ship sank during dinner, all they have is their dinner clothes. True subjects of Britain (the woman is British by marriage but French by instinct), they maintain the decorum that goes with evening dress.

For a while, that is; but the decorum gets Gordon and Miss Vernon down. After having been lovers for six years, they find it awkward to go on pretending to be just friends. So they tell hubby about it and an arrangement is worked out. After all, Miss Vernon points out to her husband, she has been no more unfaithful to him than she has to her lover, counting all the weekends she has spent at home.

But the arrangement is not as satisfactory as it should be, and it takes a great deal of talking over. To me it is most refreshing talk—light; light-hearted and literate. There are a few explosive laughs, as when the husband inquires of the lover, "Where's the wife?"—but in the main Miss Mitford prefers to play down her jokes for the sake of playing up the fun.

Three Good Comedians.

"The Little Hut" is the sort of comedy Lunt, Fontanne and Coward would have enjoyed doing when they were fooling around in "Design for Living" 20 years ago. Last evening Miss Vernon, Culver and Gordon enjoyed it, too. She is a beautiful, gay and spirited actress. Culver is immensely amusing as a British husband whom nothing can upset, and Gordon is equally funny as a lover who is the worrying and temperamental type. There are two other members of the company, Ray Gil and John Granger, and Granger, too, is good—but it wouldn't be cricket to reveal what he does.

Oliver Messel's haven for castaways is a masterpiece of exaggeration in scene design, for it outtropics the tropics. In it the displaced Britons soon have all the comforts of home, including an ingeniously self-winding phonograph which is lashed to a coconut palm.

"The Little Hut" is a light comedy, a little comedy, and its leisured pace and admitted thinness may not appeal to devotees of our native, or "Seven Year Itch," kind of fun. But I enjoyed it very much. And I enjoyed sitting, for the first time in my life, in an "orchestra divan." Yep, a divan. The first six rows at the Coronet are made up of two-seater seats, about as wide as a taxi and much more comfortable. There's an armrest in the middle of each back which you can pull down if you happen to go to the theatre with a stranger.

"THE LITTLE HUT"

Comedy by Andre Roussin, adapted by Nancy Mitford; staged by Peter Brook; setting by Oliver Messel; presented by John C. Wilson and H. M. Tennet, Ltd., at the Coronet Theatre, October 7, 1953. The cast:

Henry.....Colin Gordon
Susan.....Anne Vernon
Philip.....Roland Culver
A Stranger.....John Granger
Second Stranger.....Ray Gil

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

October 8, 1953

THEATER

'The Little Hut'

By WALTER F. KERR

"THE LITTLE HUT," a featherweight romp which opened at the Coronet Wednesday is a tantalizing show. It looks wonderful, it sounds as though it were going to be wonderful, but it is just never wonderful enough.

The sparks keep trying to ignite all evening. Oliver Messel has designed an enchanting island on which any three shipwrecked people might be joyously content. Nancy Mitford, working from the French original of Andre Roussin, has deposited three very promising mannequins upon it. There is a supremely imperturbable British husband, the sort of man who is honestly fascinated to discover that his wife is by nature polygamous. There is his best friend, deeply concerned that no one shall be upset by the information that he has been for six years the wife's lover. And there is, of course, the wife—a blissful innocent who is happy in any kind of domestic arrangement, so long as there is no quarreling about it.

• • •

Domestic arrangements on the island are swiftly settled—husband and lover take alternate weeks—and paradise is in view until an equally virile Indian chief turns up. Thereafter the two principal gentlemen are terrified that the lady will be unfaithful to them as a group.

The manner is mocking, the dialogue is graceful, and the situations are everlastingly threatening to explode into happily irreverent laughter. Furthermore, Peter Brook has staged the jape with sleek and impudent invention, making the most of such desert-island improvisations as home-made shaving equipment (with an oyster lather), a treetop phonograph controlled by cocoanut weights, and a fashionable compact made from a monstrous seashell. Though these blithe cartoons are living under primitive conditions, they are never at a loss for finger bowls.

• • •

But there is a sense of strain behind the satirical mask, and it is a little difficult to account for. In part it may be due to some merely unlucky casting. The three principals—they occupy the stage for almost all of the evening—are obviously skilled performers. Roland Culver, as the husband, has an airily pompous flair for telling a man he's a cad without exhibiting a trace of temper, and he manages an infinitely delayed take with perfect aplomb. Colin Gordon, as the temperamental lover, squints through an eyeglass and wrinkles a rabbity mustache with a splendidly nervous hauteur. Anne Vernon, darting from male to male with a strong sense of fair play, is funny indeed when she is registering indignation at the thought of being treated like a sister ("Have you ever seen Philip's sister?") or when she is casually remarking to the latest arrival, "One moment, sir, and I'm yours."

• • •

Unhappily, though, all three play at precisely the same pitch and at precisely the same rate. The style might be described as a sort of well-bred gargle. Beaten out so regularly, with such badgering insistence, and with no kind of silence or pause or majestic calm by way of occasional contrast, it becomes stubbornly self-defeating. It also leaves neither accent nor emphasis in its wake, and I imagine that a good many reasonably funny lines were lost last night in the incessant verbal scuffle.

• • •

For instance, the husband, coming upon the Indian chief, observes:

"I shall hereafter call you Stanley."

"Why Stanley?" asks the wife, smiling prettily.

"Oh, it's a good jungle name," murmurs her spouse, drifting aimlessly away.

That seems to me to have a mild sort of savor in an easy-going high-comedy way, as does the lover's expostulation that "There's something very sinister about all this happiness!" But a trickle of laughter was about all that greeted the Mitford-Roussin sallies last evening as they were rapped out in breathless haste.

The island view is delectable, and the prospects are always pleasing. But "The Little Hut" remains an uncomfortably mild outing.

The New York Times

October 8, 1953

'The Little Hut,' Adapted From the French and Imported From London

By BROOKS ATKINSON

If "The Little Hut" had not been so fabulously successful for three seasons in London, it might not seem so ordinary when it is produced here now. Extraordinary success abroad arouses extraordinary expectations here. In the production that opened at the Coronet last evening, the André Roussin comedy about fashionable sin on a desert island has its moments of impudent amusement. But the play talks its one situation to death before the evening is over and it does not make the audience feel especially lively. Without a brilliant cast "The Little Hut" is more of a soporific than a bombshell.

* * *

This is the French comedy, adapted into English by Nancy Mitford, about three people cast upon a desert island after a shipwreck. Philip and Susan are husband and wife. Henry is their best friend. In the course of time it appears that Henry is more than a friend. Without relinquishing any of his friendship for Philip, he has been Susan's lover for the past six years. The first half of "The Little Hut" is devoted to putting that furtive arrangement on a more regular basis on the island so that poor Henry will not feel so disconsolate.

In a witty comedy a situation like that can be translated into hilarious hocus-pocus, and the fact that it is shallow does not count against it. A stylist can make something funny out of the telephone book. In the London production that delighted everybody month after month, Robert Morley must have supplied the wit and the style. He is the actor who first appeared here in "Oscar Wilde" and later in "Edward, My Son" and would be welcome here at any time even in Pinero. He can distort a play and make it seem witty by merely walking on a stage. Everything starts to crackle when he puts in an appearance.

* * *

None of the current cast has that much comic electricity. That must be the element "The Little Hut" lacks here. Oliver Messel's sunny setting of the desert island is gay and extravagant. Very likely Peter Brook's direction is as droll here as it was on the home grounds.

As the husband, Roland Culver has a dry sense of humor that now and then awakens the comedy in the script. You have a feeling that "The Little Hut" does contain a lot of entertaining iniquity. But Anne Vernon, as the complaisant lady, and Colin Gordon, as the lover, are literal players. They cannot stand to one side and distort "The Little Hut" into something fantastic. They act as though they half believe what they are saying.

"The Little Hut" cannot survive honest playing.

Daily Mirror

October 8, 1953

'The Little Hut' Opens At The Coronet Theatre

By ROBERT COLEMAN

There's no accounting for tastes. "The Little Hut" ran about four years in Paris, and three in London. The New York manifestation, which John C. Wilson and H. M. Tennent, Ltd., brought to the Coronet Theatre last evening, will not, in our opinion, do very well here.

Andre Roussin penned the original, and Nancy Mitford made the English adaptation. Billed as "a light comedy," it lives up to the description. It is so light, in fact, that a good gust of wind might have blown it right off the Coronet stage. It is, in reality, a one-joke revue sketch stretched out into three acts.

THREE BRITISHERS in evening dress are discovered on an island at the curtain's rise. One is a wife, another her husband and the third her lover. Having been shipwrecked, they make the best of it. Husband and lover, after a discourse on the virtues of polygamy, decide to share the main hut with the wife on alternate weeks.

Just as they have become accustomed to the arrangement, a brawny stranger equipped with menacing knife and bow pops up. The wife mistakes him for an island prince, only to learn, after taking him into her hut, that he is the cook from their ship. As they are rescued, the wife and lover are discussing how to handle matters when they arrive back home.

The whole thing is highly artificial; the people and situations so unreal, that it is difficult to care very much about them. It should be reported, however, that there are some clever and amusing lines scattered among the more labored ones.

* * *

DIRECTOR PETER BROOK has done a gorgeous job in puffing up a little trifle into a big trifle. Colin Gordon, Anne Vernon and Roland Culver are excellent as the three angles of the inevitable French triangle. They play their zany roles with zest and pace.

Gordon and Culver are British, so naturally they have a way with dinner jackets in the tropics. They know how to keep their spirits and chins up, even when dining from shells and coconuts instead of the family plate. As for Miss Vernon, a darling of the French stage, she nobly upholds the Parisian tradition of l'amour.

And let's not forget our own John Granger. He has the build and the looks to prevent the role of the ship's cook, posing as a savage prince, from becoming utterly ridiculous. And, mind you, he draws dialogue that runs from the ugh-ugh school to broken English. It's quite an assignment and he acquits himself most creditably.

IF EVER WE ARE shipwrecked on a tropic isle, we hope that designer Oliver Messel will be our companion in misery. For he is a handy man to have around when it comes to fashioning civilized comforts from native materials.

"The Little Hut" should prove one of the more provocative plays of the season. That seemed to be indicated by the laughter and applause or lack of it last night. There were sections of the audience who found it hilarious. There were others with grim looks who resolutely refused to smile or applaud. And the couple behind us walked out at the end of the second act.

In our opinion, the Roussin comedy has a limited appeal for the ultra sophisticated. It is definitely not for the majority, and certainly not for the family trade.

Journal American

October 8, 1953

Zany Imported Farce Just Fails to Come Off

By JOHN McCLAIN

RICH and spongy new carpets adorn the aisles of the Coronet Theatre and the first six rows of seats have been transplanted by red satin divans, making everything ducky for at least a small privileged segment of the audience. But the proceedings on the stage last night, the premiere of "The Little Hut," were something less than ducky for all in attendance.

Andre Roussin's mad farce, which rocked Paris and London these past several seasons, has suffered from bad casting in this American production. The play hangs by a delicate thread and it seemed to me that the weight attached to it here strained it beyond the breaking point. It just wasn't very funny.

By now almost everybody knows that "The Little Hut" revolves around a wife, a husband and a lover stranded on a desert island.

Husband and lover are best friends and after a time it is agreed that ultimate happiness for all concerned will be achieved by sharing the wife on an alternate-week basis.

Obviously the husband is the one who finds the plan entirely satisfactory; his enthusiasm for his wife is restored by this challenge and he sleeps solidly during his non-operational moments, secure in the knowledge that his wife is safely in the arms of his pal.

Bright and Brittle

But the lover becomes insanely jealous. He is driven to near distraction when it is his turn to retire to the solitude of the little hut. And all this is further complicated by the sudden appearance of a "stranger."

Without going into the remainder of the plot it is fairly